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# **The epistemology of live blogging**

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## **The epistemology of live blogging**

### **Abstract**

This paper proposes a typology of the epistemology of live blogging through an analysis of two live news blogs: Radio New Zealand (RNZ) News' live blog of a significant earthquake in Aotearoa New Zealand in November 2016 and BBC News' live blog of the Brexit referendum result in June 2016. We use these cases to draw out five features of the genre that we suggest may characterise other live news blogs. We demonstrate that these blogs tend to (1) produce a fragmentary narrative that (2) reflects particular moments in time, (3) curate an array of textual objects from a range of information sources to produce 'networked balance;' (4) gain coherence from an often informal authorial voice or voices; and (5) generate claims to knowledge of events which are simultaneously dynamic and fragile. This typology contributes to understanding journalism's position within networked information spaces.

### **Key words:**

**Balance, Brexit, Curation, Epistemology, Journalistic authority, Live blogging, Storytelling, Temporality**

## **The epistemology of live blogging**

Live blogging is used on a growing number of Western news websites for the ongoing reporting of both sudden and planned major news events, from bombings to elections to awards ceremonies. Its form is distinctive, comprising brief posts in reverse chronological order that may include a number of elements, from statements of news to comments curated from social media to authorial observations. The text that results is fragmented in structure, relaying information as it becomes available, rather than presenting a neatly organised news story. This, in turn, contributes to conveying the 'fluid, incomplete and unpredictable nature of the story, drawing parallels with the dynamics of live television or radio news reporting who had historically held a monopoly over live event coverage' (Thorsen and Jackson, 2018: 849; Tereszkievicz, 2014).

Yet while it has parallels with other breaking news genres, we argue that the distance of live blogging from other news textual practices means the live news blog produces distinctive journalistic claims to knowledge, particularly when it comes to claiming to know what has just happened. In live blogs, updates may contradict previous posts and a clear overall narrative of the news event becomes less likely. Rather than regard these characteristics as inadequacies, we note the frequent use of the live news blog as well as its reported popularity among both news organisations and users (e.g. Thurman and Walters, 2013). A case can be made, then, that the form, as a set of textual and media features used over time to relate breaking news, tends towards a genre. In sociological terms, genres can be defined as 'historically and culturally specific, prepatterned and complex solutions to recurrent communicative problems' that not only transmit knowledge in certain ways but constitute forms of knowledge themselves (Günther and Knoblauch, 1995: 8). Tracing the

generic conventions in the live news blog allows us to draw out the particular claims to knowledge and practices of journalistic truth-telling that these texts enable. This article seeks to uncover these characteristic ways of knowing at work in live-blogging the news.

We discern five inter-related knowledge practices that we argue are characteristic of this communicative activity. The epistemological typology of live news blogging we propose is derived from an analysis of two live news blogs: Radio New Zealand (RNZ) News' live blog of a significant earthquake in Aotearoa New Zealand in November 2016 and BBC News' live blog of the Brexit referendum result in June 2016. An analysis of two blogs can be no more than suggestive and other live blogs may vary, but we argue that the ways of making sense we describe are characteristic of the genre. In developing our typology of the epistemology of live blogging, we show that these blogs (1) produce a fragmentary narrative and, in doing so, (2) reflect particular moments in time, (3) curate an array of textual objects from a range of information sources to produce 'networked balance;' (4) gain coherence from an often informal authorial voice or voices; and (5) generate claims to knowledge of events which are simultaneously dynamic and fragile. Our typology contributes to understanding what the genre enables and how live news blogging addresses some of the needs of breaking news journalism. In doing so it also adds to understanding of journalism's position more generally within networked information spaces.

### **The emergence of live news blogging**

The genre of the live news blog emerged early in the history of news websites. The UK-based *Guardian* claims an early use of the blog form in 1999 to report sports events live (Matheson, 2004). The practice of live-blogging breaking news began a few years later. In

the case of the *Guardian*, it followed the July 2005 attacks on the London transport system (Thurman and Walters, 2013). The form has since also been used to cover planned events outside sport, and has been widely adopted by news industry leaders such as the BBC, the *Guardian*, *Die ZEIT* and the *New York Times*.

Given that live blogging has existed since the mid-2000s, it has become normalised and stable, surrounded by solidifying conventions and practices. These journalistic practices have, however, yet to be adequately described by scholars (Thurman and Walters, 2013; Thorsen and Jackson, 2018). Key questions around how live blogging interrelates with the knowledge practices of journalism remain implicit and unresolved. Given that live blogs may be transient, arising and disappearing with the events they relate to, the structures and organisational apparatus of the news are less secure. As we discuss in more detail below, the live news blog is distinct from live television news reporting, where the news reporter and the authority of the television station are central to the meaning of the news (e.g. Cushion and Lewis, 2009). It is distinct from conventional online news formats in that content from social media and other sources tends to be reproduced at higher speed and with less reworking (Thorsen and Jackson, 2018). Thurman and Walters (2013) note that live blogging may appeal to audiences partly because the reporter is less of an organising presence in these ways. Rom and Reich (2017) suggest that it may appeal to journalists because there is less obligation to make truth claims and to vouch for material that has just entered the newsroom in its transient structure. These points suggest that the nature of the claim to describe a moment of reality and the relationship set up with audiences in the live blog need further elucidation.

## Contextualising the epistemology of live blogs

We do not intend to provide an all-encompassing typology of the social and textual practices that make up live blogging, but rather focus on the ways in which the genre makes distinctive claims to truth and knowledge. In other words, we take an interest in the *epistemology* of live blogging. The relative youth of journalism studies as a field has resulted in a scarcity of coherent disciplinary theory development (e.g. Steensen and Ahva, 2015; Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch, 2009). This scarcity of theory development has also resulted in limited attention to the epistemology of journalism. Ettema and Glasser (1987), who were among the first scholars to develop the idea of the epistemology of journalism, studied it in terms of how ‘journalists know what they know.’ They sought to understand what ‘counts as empirical evidence and how that evidence becomes a justified empirical belief – ergo, a knowledge claim about the empirical world’ (Ettema and Glasser, 1987: 343), and did this by means of investigating the discursive processes through which knowledge claims are justified in journalism.

This article, however, understands the epistemology of journalism more broadly in terms of the ‘*rules, routines and institutionalized procedures* that operate within a social setting and decide the form of the knowledge produced and the *knowledge claims* expressed (or implied)’ (Ekström, 2002: 260, emphasis in original). The epistemic authority of journalism – or its power to ‘define, describe and explain bounded domains of reality’ (Gieryn, 1999: 1) – rests on its claims to provide a truthful account of reality (e.g. Hermida, 2015). Journalists’ processes of justification involve the construction of narrative, operating within conventions established by institutional forms of knowing and circumscribed by power relations (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2015). But the ways in which this epistemic authority and claims to truth are produced vary significantly across journalistic genres. Journalists garner

cultural capital and hence institutional power from their ability to master ways of establishing epistemic authority within particular genres (e.g. Carlson, 2015: 3–4). As Matheson (2004) described it, drawing on a Foucauldian analysis of the relationship between knowledge and power:

Conventions of newswriting do not simply chronicle the world but [...] constitute certain claims to knowledge about such matters as the audiences for news texts, the position of journalists in that world and the relationship between audience and journalist. [...] Journalists adhere to these conventions in order to be able to make the kinds of authoritative statements about events and individuals which we are accustomed to hear from them (Matheson, 2004: 445).

In investigating the epistemology of blogging, Matheson (2004) suggested the emergence of a distinctive way of knowing premised on the ‘establishment of a different interpersonal relation, of a different authority and of a journalism focused upon connection rather than fact’ (Matheson, 2004: 453). As a result, the writing represented a ‘more “raw,” less “cooked,” source of information, allowing users to participate more in constructing knowledge about events in the world’ (Matheson, 2004: 455).

One of the key insights of work on the epistemology of journalism, then, is that journalistic knowledge creation and claims to truth are essential to professional practice, but that the ways in which knowledge is created and claims to truth asserted vary significantly across different journalistic genres. Even if epistemologies of journalism are premised on shared (and relatively stable) professional self-understandings, they are also varied, contested and dynamic.



The live blog, while owing much to the logics of blogging and social media, is studied here as a journalistic response to those logics and therefore needs to be understood in terms of its epistemology, a set of knowledge-producing practices, including the implicit truth claims, authority, temporality and relationship with the audience, through which it can be made sense of.

If journalism has always been shaped by temporality (Hemmingway and Van Loon, 2010; Rom and Reich, 2017), recent years have seen a dramatic increase in the number of genres devoted to real-time coverage. Live blogs can therefore be viewed as just one of a number of journalistic innovations which are indicative of such 'radicalisation of time' in journalism (JM Hartley, 2013). These also include 'twitter, breaking news, rolling news, push notifications, and news alerts' (Rom and Reich, 2017: 2). The radicalisation of time has resulted in an emphasis on temporal exclusivity, as defined by the ability to break news faster than the competition, and reflected in discussions over the 'need for speed' and 'thirst to be first' (Cushion and Lewis, 2009).

For Rom and Reich (2017), who studied online news flashes, these innovations also have epistemic consequences. As they see it, the difficulties of verifying news results in epistemic challenges which inform journalistic authority associated with knowledge acquisition and presentation. In news flash updates in situations characterised by crisis and immediacy, Rom and Reich (2017: 14) found that journalists 'are willing to make substantially wider use of measures that lower their own voice, distance themselves from full responsibility for the published content, and minimize their knowledge claims.' This suggests that the distinctive temporality of immediacy-oriented journalistic genres has

significant consequences for the ways in which these genres present truth claims, and thereby also shape journalistic authority and voice.

Thorsen and Jackson's (2018) study of live blogging source patterns usefully reviews the limited literature on live blogging. They suggest that research has focused on audience responses, live blogging in the newsroom, analysis of the content of live blogs, and sourcing practices. Their own analysis proposes a typology of sourcing practices and calls attention to key features of the live blog genre which we have further investigated here, including the narrative dynamics, temporality, polyvocality, remediation, social media use, non-elite penetration of blogs and the creation of episodic publics.

More broadly, research on live blogging has highlighted key issues relating to the epistemology of live blogging. First, with respect to questions around the *truth claims* of live blogging, such research has demonstrated the difficulties of verifying information drawn from external sources, particularly social media, in the context of a fast-moving story (McEnnis, 2016).

Secondly and relatedly, problems of verification tend to challenge journalists' efforts at including 'ordinary people' as sources given the difficulties of corroborating the information provided (Loke and Grimm, 2017; Thorsen and Jackson, 2018; Thurman and Schapals, 2017). While some live news blogs draw extensively on user-generated content (Thurman and Rodgers, 2014) and are characterised by polyvocality (Tereszkiewicz 2014), research suggests a cautionary approach which reinforces the elite-focused orientation of mainstream news more broadly (Thorsen and Jackson, 2018; Thurman and Schapals, 2017).

This has significant consequences for *whose* voices – and therefore whose truth claims – are presented in live blogs.

Thirdly, in terms of the authorial stance of live blogging journalists, the genre positions the liveblogger as a ‘facilitator’ (Beckett, 2010) or ‘curator’ (Thorsen and Jackson, 2018) – reflective of what we here refer to as ‘networked balance.’ Live news blogs are valued by users for their perceived accuracy and neutrality (Thurman and Walters, 2013). For example, Thurman and Walters’ work (2013) implies that the style of live blogging may enhance transparency and therefore reader trust, because it more readily allows for errors to be admitted and corrected and commonly links directly back to its sources. Fourth, with respect to the relationship to the audience generated through live-blogging, Thorsen and Jackson (2018: 863) argue that live blogs constitute ‘material communicative spaces that connect with and reflect episodic publics.’

Broader scholarly discussions over the nature of liveness in news media provide useful insights on the relationship between the temporality of live blogging and claims to truth. Van Es (2017) notes that live media can, on the one hand, be understood in technical terms as producing real-time information. On the other hand, the audience experience of hearing the news ‘live’ is a social construct. It is the product of ‘hidden production care-structures’ (Scannell, 2014) by broadcasters that foster a particular relationship with audiences and a sense of urgency (van Es 2017). Scannell (2014) describes a sense of co-presence between news actors and audiences that may result, in which a group, even a nation, is brought together in the now. Hemmingway and van Loon (2010) argue, by contrast, that the experience of liveness must be understood in terms of its manufacture through a particular

technological and social apparatus. Mediated liveness results not so much in a coming together but an assemblage in which social actors' sense of being in the world is fragmented, reduced to a series of interruptions and spectacular moments. The rhetoric of liveness, Couldry (2015) further notes, appeals to producers by writing the media into the centre of social reality and to audiences by providing them with a route to participate in the social by attending to live media. A key question for an analysis concerned with the knowledge claims of particular live blogs is how the consciously fragmented temporality of the genre leads producers to certain claims to liveness, including the claim to produce co-presence across disjointed posts.

If this genre is indeed meeting readers' temporal and spatial preferences and addressing emerging expectations of participation and transparency in contemporary politics (Thurman and Walters 2013: 99), what are the characteristics of this genre and in particular what kinds of claim to knowledge and practices of truth-telling arise within it? These are the key questions animating our study.

### **Approach and methodology**

The two live blogs chosen to shed light on these questions concerned, respectively, a planned and political event (an excerpt from the BBC live blog coverage of the Brexit referendum on whether the United Kingdom should leave the European Union; BBC, 2016) and a sudden natural disaster (an excerpt from RNZ's live blogging of the 7.8 magnitude Kaikōura earthquake, in which two people died and a number of Aotearoa New Zealand towns and cities suffered damage; RNZ, 2016). The goal in choosing these texts was to avoid too narrow a focus on one news outlet or one kind of event, but also to ensure enough

similarity in live-blogging practices to allow patterns to be discerned. Both news outlets are state-owned broadcasters with a public service remit, although very different in staffing and audience, and both events are serious news events of national importance.

Two days' worth of blogging were gathered from the BBC on the evening of the referendum poll, 23 June, to late on 24 June 2016, using the Internet Archive Wayback Machine, garnering 720 posts. On RNZ, two days' worth of blogging were gathered from the time of a large earthquake at 00:02 on 14 November, to the close of live blogging on 15 November 2016, garnering 612 posts. As the news events unfolded, the content on both live blogs reverted to conventional news story formats, leading to a decision to cease gathering material rather than continue till the live-blogging ended.

A close analysis was performed by one of the authors on both blogs, through repeated readings of both, paying attention to genre features identified in discourse analysis as characteristic of news genres. These features include: discourse structures such as narrative elements or the way headlines and news intros/leads organise material; the presence or absence of authorial voice, including related elements such as the modality, or expressed speaker attitude towards the content (Halliday, 1987); ways of referencing external texts, the use of hyperlinks and embedding of media; and lexical features such as labelling practices and noun phrases. Features identified in the live blogging literature also informed our analytical approach, particularly the list of characteristics in Thurman and Walters (2013): informal tone, updates in reverse chronological order, transparent corrections, the generous use of multimedia and the signposting of content from social media platforms and other websites. The strategy in the iterative analysis of the texts was tracing the similarities

and differences of these texts to how other forms of news discourse would approach a major breaking news event. Features that, in accordance with Günther and Knoblauch's (1995) specification of genre, occurred in patterned ways and that could be read as solutions to communicative tasks, were collated and evaluated in terms of their consequences for the texts' claims to knowledge. That analysis was then organised into categories of ways of knowing, producing the typology.

## **Analysis**

### Narrative structure: Fragmentation and openness

We begin our analysis by examining the fragmentation of narrative structure, which is perhaps the most striking feature of the genre. We suggest that this results in the live blog being less textually coherent than other kinds of news text and instead cohering largely in terms of the moments it signifies. A conventional news text coheres textually in terms of its intro or lead. What makes the paragraphs a coherent text rather than a list of fact claims is the centre-and-satellite logic governing them, whereby the opening sentence summarises the story in terms of the most newsworthy element and other paragraphs support and fill out its claims (White, 2000) – a narrative structure commonly referred to as the 'inverted pyramid' lead. The live blog, by contrast, is radically temporal in structure, simply organising material in reverse chronological order, following the logic of blogs and social media feeds. As a consequence, the string of blog posts gains its coherence partly from what lies outside the text, to which it stands as a response. At the end of the evening of the Brexit vote count, the BBC live blog, for example, reproduces tweets from the BBC's Turkey correspondent Mark Lowen and senior political journalist Nick Robinson:

#### **BBC correspondents react**

A political, economic, social bombshell. This is completely extraordinary.

This is as close to a revolution as we've experienced in my lifetime. And it's only just begun #EUref

The next item – posted above this – is unrelated, 'Emergency meeting of European Parliament presidents', and the next tweet from Robinson posted on the blog five minutes later (there are no more from Lowen) is not textually linked to the previous post. The second post retains a major structuring feature of Twitter; the #EUref hashtag, but it is not prominent elsewhere in the live blog.<sup>1</sup> The bullet-point summary posted at the top of the live blog provides some overall coherence to the posts, but there is much less capacity in this genre than in other news genres to tell the reader what has happened.

Liveness produces a claim to reference the real, even if challenging the narrative textual apparatus of news journalism, by referring to a reality that is distinct from the incomplete telling. It should be noted that this is not a claim embedded in the genre. Some of the live blog posts, particularly towards the end of the two news events studied here, were written as narrative news texts and sometimes reproduced whole news texts. But in the early stages of both events, the live blog was used to reproduce time-stamped fragments with little textual coherence, with some statements contradicted by later ones. At 03:37 on the day of the earthquake RNZ posted about disruption to national school examinations due to take place in the most affected city, Wellington:

There are lots of questions coming in re whether NCEA exams will continue as planned today... unfortunately we can't provide any answers at the moment.

Rather than writing a story about the lack of information, RNZ News produces a deliberately and explicitly incomplete text. This text is a practical response, given it was the middle of the night, but done in a way that does not push material towards a story and therefore accomplishes little of the independent descriptive, organising or evaluative work that characterises narrative news genres. In the early RNZ texts about the quake, the resulting text therefore stands in a contingent relationship to the reality it references, in the same way as the BBC correspondent posts stand as moments of response to the news of Brexit. Through genre-specific narrative devices, it signals a lack of textual coherence. As Thorsen and Jackson (2018) argued, the ‘narrative dynamic’ of live blogs is unfolding and transparent.

#### Temporality: Overlapping moments in time

This fragmentation of story elements means that the blog’s account of time becomes fragmented as well, leading at times to a text with multiple overlapping temporalities. This distinguishes the temporal nature of the live blog’s constitution of knowledge compared to the ordered account of time characterising conventional news narratives. Narrative structure organises the temporality of an account, both in the sense of ordering elements in a sequence, constructing a causative structure (so that one moment arises out of preceding ones) and aligning the audience with the narrator’s moment of telling the story (see Montgomery et al, 2007). Some of the posts, particularly on the BBC blog, produce such narratives. However, the many shorter posts, often only one-sentence long, appear to be mere moments in a story. For example, a BBC post reads:



Brexiteer Liam Fox MP welcomes the UK's decision to leave the European Union and tells Newshour that concerns over financial markets, NATO and a potential anti-UK backlash from Europe have been overplayed.

This fragment directs the reader to the BBC World Service Newshour webpage. It therefore operates by a logic through which Newshour's news and the moment of the interview with the politician are not subsumed within the blog, but remain separate, if now linked.

As a consequence, the blog post's moment of news is often a weak news event, as the following BBC post illustrates:

**All quiet at Downing Street...so far**

The press are gathering outside Number 10 Downing Street in anticipation of an appearance from Prime Minister David Cameron. He is expected to appear by 08:00 BST, but BBC political editor Laura Kuenssberg says there have been indications there could be an early 'dawn raid' statement.

In television news terms, a live stand-up in front of a political leader's office, waiting for an announcement, creates a spectacle in which both the BBC correspondent and the (absent) prime minister become the focus of news interest. Stiegler (1994, 1996, cited in Hemmingway and van Loon, 2010) describes these news events as producing the *événementalisation* (eventisation) of the social, as a news media fetishisation of the 'now' leads to representation of the world in terms of crisis, interruption and disruption, leaving the public sometimes disoriented and disconnected. Yet in the live blog the performance of the news telling cannot produce such a focal event. The reporter's time on the scene is not sustained (it is not repeated and 5 minutes elapse before the next blog post). It is instead one among many experiences, each in their own time and place, unable to stand as the

frame within which others are presented. This contrasts sharply with the ways in which conventional news stories are framed. Whereas the temporality of conventional news is ordered and its interpretive framework is therefore shaped by eventisation, the temporality of live blogs is premised on the representation of fragmented moments in time.

#### Journalistic role: Curating multi-layered texts within a network

As noted above, the live blog genre tends to place the locus of news as outside the moment of the blog text itself, in the network of texts. In contrast to the discursive production of reality that has characterised news journalism since the start of the twentieth century (Matheson, 2000), the news here does not assimilate those news events within its own discourse: it gathers, passes on and links to them for an at times explicitly addressed audience. Thus an RNZ post states:

A reminder if you're in Wellington:

@WREMO

We're advising people not to come into the CBD today but if you are note that trains and ferries aren't running at the moment. (Wellington Regional Emergency Management Office)

This reminder is not voiced by RNZ, but is presented as coming from WREMO, the local disaster response office, and is followed by the office's tweet. The post stands as a link in the chain of reminding residents and therefore operates as part of the communication rather than as a description of it.

A number of scholars have postulated a shift in journalism from authoritative narrators to curators, who gather, sift and verify material but play weaker gatekeeper or interpretive roles (see, for example, Thorsen, 2013). They instead operate as ‘gatewatchers’ (Bruns, 2005) or ‘networked journalists’ (Jarvis, 2006; Beckett, 2010). Such journalism, particularly when it takes places in networked media and overlaps with citizen media, may place as much emphasis on news as a process of finding out, sharing and making sense rather than news as a finished product (Lewis, 2010).

The curated news of the two live news blogs and the sourcing practices of their reporters fit this model of decentred journalism. However, close analysis suggests they operate as text in terms of layers more than nodes in networks. That is, the live blog’s relationship appears to be primarily with other texts rather than with other actors in its network. Both blogs analysed here retain the journalistic textual practice of reprocessing other texts (see Bell, 1991). Many of those texts come from correspondents, radio and television coverage from the parent broadcasters and from politicians and other on Twitter. Our findings echo those of previous studies on live blog sourcing practices (e.g. Meulenbeld, 2015; Thorsen and Jackson, 2018; Tereszewicz, 2014; Thurman and Walters, 2013). For example, Thorsen and Jackson (2018) demonstrated that the sourcing practices of crisis live blogs were characterised by a high degree of remediation, while Thurman and Schapals (2017: 286) found that lives blogs feature ‘about 15 times more multimedia elements than print articles’.

User-generated content is rare on RNZ and non-existent on the BBC. This can be partly explained by the difficulty, in the live reporting context, of verifying the social media

accounts of unknown sources (Thurman and Walters, 2013). But at the same time this is a question of knowledge claims: the loose structuring of knowledge in these live news blogs, whereby they pass on what others know, means that the live bloggers here know at second hand. In social media terms, they are posts that originate on someone else's timeline. Structurally, this results in texts that are frequently made up of layers, in which authority is left in originating texts, without the blog authoring them. Those originating texts must therefore have some authority.

This layering practice operates according to the logic of passing on, as noted above: it is not curation on the analogy of an art curator telling a story about a body of work. In the following example, the live blog passes on without comment a tweet from RNZ's evening news programme, Checkpoint:

Here's our interview with Dennis Buurman, from Encounter Kaikoura – worried for his business and staff.

The Checkpoint tweet itself acts as a further layer, directing the reader on, via the adverb 'Here' to yet another text, the RNZ website where the radio interview is recorded. There are, then, three levels: the interview on the RNZ website, the tweet offering it and the blog post passing it on. The blog can be thought of as a thin layer, whose status as news differs in important respects from the other layers, as Table 1 describes.

Table 1: Layers of text in RNZ blog post

Status of text	News piece	Live blog post

Epistemological	Claims to know Buurman	Relates the offer of an object (an interview)
Ontological	Constitutes the news	Located elsewhere, just after the interview
Relationship to audience	Informing	Sharing

While the Checkpoint text collapses the moment of interview into the moment of live broadcast, making a shared radio moment, the blog text takes place after and outside that moment. The liveness of the blogging inflects the claim to know further. As a live account of those activities rather than a performance of liveness, the news blog foregrounds the circulation of knowledge rather than pinning it down. This suggests a complex shift in the role of the journalist, which also reflects the distinctive authorial stance of the genre.

#### Authorial stance: Networked balance

In the live blog, the journalist moves away from the objectivity of conventional news stories to what we refer to as ‘networked balance.’ The authorial stance of live blogging combines, as Beckett (2011) has put it, information, analysis and commentary. This might include more personal, opinionated and emotional content, but in such a way that their sourcing practices, as other authors (McEnnis, 2016, Thorsen and Jackson, 2013; Thurman and Walters, 2013) have established, continue to pay heed to journalistic conventions of objectivity and balance. More than anything, the live blog weaves together discrete moments of multiple news actors from a position aligned with the experiencing public.

In both blogs studied here, there was minimal voicing, in the sense of either a personal or authoritative narrator, suggesting this is not a required element in the genre. The authorial dimension in both blogs is better described as a human presence, a sense that the material has been posted by someone and is intended as of value for blog readers. The RNZ post, 'Tsunami sirens are sounding in Lower Hutt,' for example, positions the authorial presence of the blog as alongside readers, not knowing what will happen next, and so also aligns the blog with them. Chignell (2009: 90) notes that the appeal of live radio also lies in such a sense of co-presence – 'A friend that is also somehow in the same place as the listener.'

The specifics of that human presence, such as the values aligned to or the kind of relationship opened up, differ between the blogs. More important for the claim to knowledge is that, in both blogs, the conventions of objectivity, including balance of perspectives, the absence of personal voice, the attribution of fact claims to sources and the reliance on professional news judgement (Tuchman, 1972), give way to a practice where balance is sought amongst the available perspectives on the news event and distance is maintained through the practice of offering noted above – what we here refer to as networked balance. In the BBC blog, this could occasionally be mechanistic, as in this post of contrasting photographs:

Celebrations and commiserations: A counting agent celebrates in central London after a long night with a bottle of wine – but at Remain HQ expressions are glum.

The cumulative effect is less mechanistic, however, allowing different accounts to be given credence as the event unfolds in a flow of comments and responses. The live blog logic of promptly passing on snippets of news enables a genre characterised less by voice or argument and more by alignment with the reader and with the flow of material in the

network. In that sense, the knowledge claims produced by the genre of the live blog are premised on the affordances of the platform which facilitate a distinctive form of networked balance reflecting the co-presence of the reporter.

#### Status of the text: Dynamic and temporary

Fifthly and finally, whereas the conventional news story – particularly in its print and broadcast formats – represents a finished product, the live blog emphasises the news story as an ever-evolving, incomplete process. Ontologically, the text aligns itself with the changing character of the event, rather than standing outside it as a report. The blog has no set duration, limit to the number of posts or restriction to posting just one kind of content. This dynamic form accommodates journalists making mistakes or giving partial accounts, correcting and updating. For a news organisation to dedicate a live blog to an event is a signal both of the event's high news values and its swiftly developing nature. To *Guardian* live blogger Andrew Sparrow, the blog makes sense on the analogy of journalism as the first draft of history: He describes live blogging as 'the first draft of journalism' (wireposts, 2010). His colleague Paul Owen suggests that live blogging enables journalists to open up the process of journalism to the readers, allowing them to see how news is gathered as it happens (2012).

All journalism is temporally-bounded, the best account for now, but the live blog differs from some other genres in making that explicit. So the BBC blogged:

We reported earlier that US President Barack Obama had said the 'special relationship' between the US and the UK would endure despite the Brexit vote.

We now know that in a phone call earlier today, Mr Obama also ‘expressed his regret’ at the fact that David Cameron would be standing down.

Mr Obama called him ‘a trusted partner and friend,’ according to the White House [hyperlink].

The resulting text is therefore marked as being contingent. As Scannell (2014) notes of live news in general, the text is not bounded by the teller, whose knowledge is partial and unfolding.

The contingent, temporary and fragmentary coverage of the live blog is therefore assembled somewhere between the blog editor and the reader. That makes for an open text. There remains, however, a will to make sense, as well as a reflexivity. The RNZ blog is scattered with tags such as ‘Sounds like it’s largely precautionary,’ on a warning that is passed on against entering one Wellington office block, that communicate both the uncertainty about what is known and the desire to narrow that uncertainty. On one level, the point here is that the live blog participates in what Hermida (2010) has termed the ambient news environment, but the more significant point is *how* it does this. We suggest live blogs can be characterised as open communication, helping the reader follow developing news and multiple threads of information and discussion.

## **Conclusion**

Through our analysis of the two live blogs, we have identified a series of distinctive, interlinked features, which have implications for the way knowledge about the real is produced. Some of these features may arise in particular form in these two public service blogs, for example the sense of co-presence but absence of opinionated voice. However, we



argue that the possibilities of making sense that lead to these specific features can be described as characteristic of the genre. These become apparent through a systematic comparison of the epistemology of the live blog with that of the conventional news story. Based on our findings, we have summarised these characteristics in Table 2.

Table 2: A typology of the epistemology of the live blog compared to the news story

	News story	Live blog
Narrative structure	Inverted pyramid	Reverse chronological order, fragmentation, lack of textual coherence, open text
Temporality	Ordered Interpretive framework shaped by eventisation and elite voices	Overlapping, representing moments in time Interpretive framework shaped by multiple voices
Journalistic role	Storytelling; sharing of information	Curator passing on layered information
Authorial stance	Objectivity	Networked balance, co-presence
Status of text	Finished product	Dynamic process, temporary

This typology seeks to describe the key discursive elements by which the blogs we studied make sense as news; that is, what makes the textual practice distinctive with respect to its production of knowledge. Clearly, other forms of live blogging, such as in sport or entertainment, will encompass their own distinctive discursive elements (see also Thorsen and Jackson, 2018). The claim made here is that live blogs will in general orient towards this knowledge practice, which entails a distinctive narrative structure, temporality, journalistic role, authorial stance and, ultimately, status of the text. As noted in our analysis, the classic news text makes a claim to know the world through its highly processed text,

ordered around the news intro or lead and buttressed by distancing conventions of objectivity in which the reporting voice stands outside the news event and where the authority of the text derives in part from its status as a finished product. The live news blog diverges in important respects from these long-established norms. The *narrative structure* of live blogs is characterised by the fragmentation of the text and its lack of textual coherence, which serve to open the text but also weaken its claims to knowledge. The overlapping *temporality* of the live blog allows it to represent moments in time. It challenges power relations constituted by conventional journalistic texts, allowing for layered texts made up of multiple voices. It therefore holds the potential to destabilise the ways in which power relations structure the constitution of knowledge. The *role of the journalist* is decentred as a curator; the text circulates rather than performs the news; and the boundary between front stage and back stage weakens as the *authorial stance* aligns more with the audience through the practice of networked balance and the construction of co-presence. Above all, the *status of the live blog as a text* differs from much news practice in enabling temporary, contingent sites of publicness to emerge, which may endure only for the time of the event being reported on. The spectacle of news interrupting the flow of time gives way to multiplicity. While news blogs will differ, we propose that the ways of making sense that we have identified are likely to be more generally shared across the genre.

The implications of these shifts in the epistemology of the news are, in our view, two-fold. Firstly, live news blogging that follows the textual practices identified above is less able to stand in for the real, instead producing layered texts that do not privilege a particular version of the real. In John Hartley's (2009) terms, the emphasis is less on representation that draws people together in cultural consensus than on productivity; or on a multiplicity of

perspectives produced across connections. Following Rom and Reich (2017), we suggest there is value for both journalists and audiences in live media that do not yet seek to make sense and the combination of elements presented in our live-blogging typology enables that. Secondly, the audience plays a greater role in the knowledge produced across the live blog's elements. News happens partly in the relationship, in the passing on of material across a network in a contingent, incomplete text. Again, together the elements of the typology weaken the hierarchy of knowing between journalist and public. However, it is important to emphasise that the sourcing practices of the news are less disrupted by this practice than such a statement might suggest, given that the network in which both these blogs participate remains dominated by elite sources, including other journalists.

In these ways, the live blog can be understood as a journalistic response to the logics of social media, in which what Deleuze and Guattari (1988) term a rhizomatic relationship applies. Here, rather than a tree-like hierarchy of knowledge and knowers, produced through narrative forms, knowledge is a matter of the kinds of structures visible in rhizomatic plants, where no part of the plant is central and there is no natural limit to the connections between rhizomes. Analysis at the level of genre only describes so much but the live blog can partly be understood in these terms. The analysis here provides a set of questions to ask of other live blogs around how meaning about news events and issues is produced, particularly how far they produce layered texts with multiple temporalities and step aside from the authority of the classic news genre as well as the relationship set up between news producers and news users in these texts. For us, key questions include whether the live news blog's ways of knowing enable an opening up of news frames, in the crucial early moments when crises occur that threaten forms of power, whether the

production of weak news events that characterises the blogs we studied leads to a weakening of journalism's power to hold to account and whether distinctive structures of trust may be built up in such blogs in contexts where journalistic authority to know is at issue.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> Of the approximately 740 BBC blog posts in the sample, there were only 19 references to #EUref.

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